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Ronald Reagan's America

ALTHOUGH the president's recent nuclear arms policy speech signalled a welcome turn toward realism in international relations, one still has to think that Ronald Reagan's view of the world was permanently affected by the simplicities of the B-movies in which he used to make his living. Last May Mr. Reagan addressed the University of Notre Dame commencement, an occasion which four of his predecessors have used for major policy statements. At the outset of his speech the president—whose domestic policies were already well known and who is widely perceived to have no foreign policy except cold war anticommunism—eschewed any intention of following previous custom because it would be an intrusion on the spirit of the day. He then proceeded in his notably amiable manner to strain credulity with a series of loosely connected thoughts ranging from the mythology of Notre Dame football to the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union. His disclaimer notwithstanding, the ideas he set forth must be taken as the conceptual building blocks of his national agenda. Some extracts follow.

This nation was born when a little band of men we call the founding fathers. . . brought to all mankind for the first time the concept that man was born free.

It is as if the American polity sprang full-blown out of nothing. Could they speak now, how would the Greeks, the great medieval thinkers, and the philosophers of the Enlightenment respond? They would indulge, we hope, the peculiarly American exaggeration.

If ever the great independent colleges and universities like Notre Dame give way to and are replaced by tax-supported institutions, the struggle to preserve academic freedom will have been lost.

Mixing courtesy toward his hosts with a political statement, the president falls into a pit. Every one of the fifty states has public universities and colleges which have made unique contributions to the national well-being and whose devotion to the cause of academic freedom has been in the authentic tradition of independent scholarship. Mr. Reagan, in his zeal to boost private initiative at the expense of big government, "forgets" that the land-grant institutions are one of the great achievements of American government.

For too long, government has been fixing things that aren't broken and inventing miracle cures for which there are no known diseases.

Thus does the president support his war on excessive government regulation. Does he pretend that the structure of society is solid and needs no adjustment? The answer is indirect: whatever is wrong will be remedied by the release of market forces. If you are poor or black or female, if you stand for clean air and pure water, if in your job you run the risk of black lung or brown lung disease, this is bad news for you. But if you are cruising high in the system, Reaganomics assures you a smoother ride.

As for miracle cures for unknown diseases, one can only say that this extravagant statement masks the unfinished state of U.S. public health policy.

The West will not contain communism, it will transcend communism. We will not bother to denounce it, we'll dismiss it as a sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.

How airily he waves aside the most consequential sociopolitical reality of the century. Without clear basis in fact, the assertion has the ring of provocation. What the community of nations needs is accommodation between the superpowers, not the careless belligerence which has provoked grave fears throughout the world.

For the West, for America, the time has come to dare to show the world that our civilized ideas, our traditions, our values are not—like the ideology and war machine of totalitarian societies—a facade of strength. It is time the world knew that our intellectual and spiritual values are rooted in the source of all real strength—a belief in a supreme being, a law higher than our own.

Perhaps the president had in mind the Massachusetts Bay Colony and its Puritan theocracy, a social model separated by two and a half centuries of thought from the ideas of Jefferson, Franklin, and their illustrious company. The work of the founders was based on the concepts of the Enlightenment, which—save the mark—was a rationalist, humanist philosophy. Religion had as little to do with the formulation of the democratic principles of the American nation as it did with inspiring the lives of some of the principal actors in that great drama. Its influence since that time has waxed and waned with popular feeling. After the Second World War (during which no atheists had been found in foxholes) there was a great resurgence of faith, and much was made of the fact that the likes of George Washington had

spoken of the importance of religion and morality as the supports of political prosperity and civic virtue. But postwar religion was a passing phenomenon and America turned rather quickly into a consumer society whose emblems are more typically the bowling alley, the television set, and the six-pack than church on Sunday.

Banding words like "facade of strength," Mr. Reagan appears to underestimate the adversary. Does he remember Stalingrad? Vietnam? Korea?

Did a generation steeled by a hard war and a harsh peace forsake honor at the moment of a great climactic struggle for the human spirit?

What harsh peace were the people of this country forced to endure? This is as puzzling now as when John F. Kennedy mentioned it in his inaugural address. For Americans the result of victory in 1945 was unprecedented prosperity.

The great climactic struggle is presumably that between democracy and communism. Were we not told a few paragraphs back that communism is turning the last pages of its bizarre history—as though any time now it will self-destruct?

The world will soon know and history someday record that in its third century the American nation came of age—affirming its leadership of free men and women—serving selflessly a vision of man with God, government for people, and humanity at peace.

Such ritualistic presidential intonements have a tenuous relation to reality. There is precious little operative vision of man with God in this land. Traditional religion is in a period of quiescence. The extremism of born-again fundamentalism, for all its electronic razzle-dazzle, departs too far from the norm of everyday experience. In talking about God and America—something they all seem compelled to do—presidents customarily ignore the pluralism and hedonism of American society. Mr. Reagan is aware that the nation needs to find its soul, but he busies himself building an image.

Government for people. The Reagan budget's transfer of wealth to the wealthy makes this a cruel joke.

Humanity at peace. Of all the historic delusions man has visited upon himself, the greatest may be peace. It was said of the Romans that they "make a solitude and call it peace." "The peace of God" is an Arabic phrase; it is, we suppose, what was recently bestowed on Anwar Sadat. "We had to destroy the village to save it," explained the American major in Vietnam. The long Pax Britannica was bought with blood, the short-lived Pax Americana with the bad seed of the atom.

War and repression across the globe in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America mock the notion of humanity at peace. Worse, the great northern powers, locked in serious tensions among them

selves, contribute adventurously to the spreading chaos in the southern half of the world, where most of the people are. The annual production of \$800,000,000,000 in armament is ample evidence that we are embattled beyond any hope of peace unless a new vision of human affairs is somehow evolved.

Mr. Reagan and his comfortable circle dwell in a milieu of nostalgic capitalist privilege. One need not have any special brand of ideology to know that their vision is antique. Rather than coming of age under their guiding hands, America is more likely to reexperience painful adolescence. Nor will it successfully affirm leadership of "free" men and women when it has set out to return so many of its own people to economic bondage.

WITH THESE strictures some will agree, others will not. Whatever view one takes, it is of great importance to put the Reagan presidency into perspective. It is foolhardy to deny that historic forces have lodged Mr. Reagan in the White House, for his presence there is no accident. The prevailing triumph of conservatism is traceable to a genuine loss of consensus; we have fallen out with one another and are no longer in basic agreement on how to manage society. The signs are incontestable: the decline of political parties, of labor unions, of religion and traditional mores; the ruin of economies and the confusion of economics; the flight of the liberals; the immobility of education; the backlash against social justice; the counterattack on environmental controls; the growth of militarism, the dilution of foreign policy, and the enfeeblement of diplomacy.

The question is whether Mr. Reagan can forge a new consensus out of a fundamental disarray. On the record of what he told the class of 1981—and of anything he has said since—the answer is no. His perception of the situation is ominously narrow; his remedy for our problems is old wine in new bottles.

The emergence of consensus will, in any event, take more time than is allotted to a single presidential administration. We can hope that in the interim nothing irreparable happens—to be specific, that we do not stumble into a nuclear war. We hear administration voices saying that nuclear war is winnable and survivable. To know that such calculations go on at the highest levels of government is profoundly alarming. We must trust that the world's ability to set off the big flash that means the end of civilization will give pause even to the reckless. It will take radical reappraisal, for although the nuclear bomb has been around for quite a while now, it remains the only new thing under the sun and, as Einstein said, it has changed everything except the way men think.

—Charles McIsaac

The Mind's Eye invites readers' responses to the views expressed in this editorial.

When the Informer Starred in Hollywood

by Maynard Seider

Naming Names, by Victor S. Navasky. Viking Press, 482 pp., \$15.95

IT WAS NOT the best of times, 1947 in cold war America. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) opened hearings in Washington on the "red menace" in the movie industry. Executive Order 9835 forced government employees to sign loyalty oaths. The Taft-Hartley Act was in the process of annihilating unions whose officers refused to sign non-Communist affidavits. Within a year Whittaker Chambers would be accusing Alger Hiss of espionage, and a young congressman from California, Richard Nixon, would be building a national reputation as a Commie hunter. Our finest Hollywood treasure, the "little tramp," Charlie Chaplin, would soon be exiled from America. And in 1951 the state would convict Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of passing A-bomb secrets to the Russians. Two years later they were executed.

Naming Names is not simply another study of what most of us have come to call McCarthyism.* It is as Victor Navasky suggests, a morality play, an attempt to uncover the reasons why good people turn informer. HUAC vs. Hollywood offers as good an opportunity as any to uncover that mystery.

The author, editor of the radical weekly, *The Nation*, has interviewed more than 160 veterans of those times, adding immeasurably to our understanding of the participants. Navasky has also utilized studies of the history, politics, and art of that era. Finally, he has judiciously and intelligently delved into the sociological and psychological literature on conformity and obedience. The result stands as a most important contribution to the social psychology of the informer.

*Perhaps it's our penchant for personalizing an era, but naming it after the junior senator from Wisconsin perpetuates several historical inaccuracies: first, systematic anti-Communist attacks from the government during this general period began well before McCarthy reached the Senate; second, if any individual deserves to "surname" this era, it should be President Truman, a fierce anti-Communist and the originator of the federal loyalty oaths; finally, deep-rooted strands in American culture and institutions encourage periodic witch hunts, and while an outspoken politician may grab the media attention, he should be viewed as more symptom than cause of the phenomenon. Navasky understands this well and makes a singular contribution by exploring the social and cultural networks of the Hollywood community. In fact, the only thing that keeps me from calling his book a superior piece of sociology is Navasky's proud confession at a 1981 Eastern Sociological Society panel discussion that he was not a sociologist and preferred not to be accused of being one: "I am not now nor have I ever been. . ."

WHAT was HUAC up to? Although the ostensible purpose of a congressional committee is to gather information for needed legislation, HUAC submitted no legislative proposals to the House. It simply called witnesses and asked them about their political activities, past and present, and about the activities of others. The committee wanted more than a confession—it wanted names. It wanted Communists (present and former), "fellow travelers," and even those who refused to denounce Communists. The Communist party in the United States had been a very active and potent force in the civil rights struggles and labor battles of the 1930s and 1940s, and its presence in the Hollywood guilds was no secret. Now, with the cold war and anti-Stalinist sentiment raging, the committee called on suspects to disavow their past, admit their mistakes, and finger their colleagues. When the first group of witnesses, the Hollywood Ten, refused to answer the committee's classic question—"Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist party?"—they were sent to jail for terms of up to a year.

Time went on and fears escalated as more witnesses were called. Those summoned before the committee had three choices: (1) like the Hollywood Ten, they could refuse to answer any questions by invoking their First Amendment rights of free speech and association; this avenue earned them a contempt citation, prison, and a place on the blacklist; (2) they could refuse to answer questions on Fifth Amendment grounds (privilege against self-incrimination) and escape prison but not the blacklist; or (3) they could cooperate with the committee, name names, and continue working. One-third of the Hollywood witnesses chose the last option. They became informers. How is it that so many went along, and with what consequences?

Some, a minority, cooperated on principle. They believed that their previous Party membership was a mistake and that Communists were a dangerous force to be hunted out and punished. However, most were ambivalent on these issues and had no easy answers for dealing with the committee. Naming names, informing on one's friends and associates, was not a first choice. Navasky suggests two major reasons why many in this group finally decided to answer the committee's questions.

Support for noncooperation from major civil libertarian groups had virtually dried up. These organizations, traditional defenders of the First Amendment for all Americans, decided that Communists didn't deserve that protection. They refused to make the committee's actions a free speech issue. Then, too, the Hollywood subculture—friends, job associates, the guilds, lawyers, and others—strongly urged cooperation with the committee. Thus, the push from within was to go along, and the countervailing force from without had dissipated.

ONE COULD sense the direction that the liberal organizations would take as far back as 1940 when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) forced Elizabeth Gurley Flynn off its board because she belonged to the Communist party. ACLU political positions became increasingly conservative, and it entered a free speech legal battle for a Communist only with great reluctance. Even more publicly anti-Communist than the ACLU were the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), started in 1947 by liberals such as historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, columnist James Wechsler, and Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis. ADA's strategy called for a shoring up of the "vital center" (a term borrowed from the title of a book by Schlesinger). To do so, the organization criticized the right but more vehemently attacked the Communist party, even calling for the prosecution of its members.

The concern of the ACLU, and ADA, and a third liberal organization, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, was not so much that HUAC violated constitutional procedures, but that in its hunt for subversives, it might make mistakes—i.e., pick up a few liberals along with the Communists. Thus they had no quarrel with the premise of HUAC or of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. They simply wanted the committees to do their work well and to be accurate.

WHO COULD those called to the committee turn to? One thinks of one's friends, neighbors, and colleagues—one's community. But the community itself urged compliance for a variety of economic, psychological, and social reasons:

As the writer Sylvia Richards recalled, her lawyer urged her to "cooperate"; her therapist made clear that since she had quit the Party, taking the Fifth Amendment would be a self-destructive if not suicidal act; and her boss, a former Communist for whom she felt respect and loyalty, had himself become an informer. And all of these people saw themselves as liberals. Add to such confidants talent agents who saw the failure to name names strictly as a career impediment; religious, political, and trade-union organizations that endorsed the naming of names as a way of distancing their member-

ship from charges of Communism; and those majorities and minorities who simply found it easier to avoid the fray than to risk personal or organizational injury. One then gets a sense of an informer subculture that was as real a presence in the community as the HUAC hearings that occasioned it.

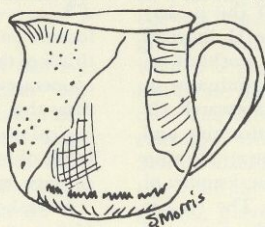
A lot of people grumbled, many groups wavered, but they went along, thus adding to the committee's legitimacy. Martin Gang, a leading Hollywood lawyer at the time, revealed the sometimes tragicomic nature of such behavior in his account of the Committee on Communism in the Jewish Community, formed by an organization of California Jewish groups. Gang told Navasky why such a committee was needed:

Because the FBI had passed around a list of institutions that wouldn't get the preparedness plans if there were an atom bomb attack. The Mount Sinai Hospital was Jewish-sponsored, and we were tipped off by the FBI that they couldn't give the Mount Sinai Hospital the defense plans because there was a Communist on the staff. So we had to get a Committee on Communism. . . . And we found out that a lady who was very prominent in the Party was a mistress of one of the Mount Sinai directors, so the FBI wouldn't give them the god-damn defense plans in case somebody dropped a nuclear bomb on L.A.

Our job was to try to find out what the facts were, so that the hospitals and other such institutions wouldn't get into trouble by running into problems like that. It was self-defense in that lousy atmosphere.

Within that "lousy" cultural atmosphere, Navasky zeroes in on the individuals who informed and those who resisted. Here he does some of his best writing, particularly in Chapter 7, "Elia Kazan and the Case for Silence." He counterposes the careers of two best friends, director Kazan and playwright Arthur Miller, giants of the stage who worked together on *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. After Kazan named names in April of 1952, the friendship was over. They literally didn't talk to each other but, as Navasky ingeniously points out, the two loudly continued the dialogue in their ensuing work. Kazan directed scripts which justified the informer (e.g., *On the Waterfront*) and Miller created works which condemned the stoolie (e.g., *The Crucible* and *A View From the Bridge*). Miller found himself blacklisted even before HUAC called him to testify in 1956. During that appearance Miller's life followed his art. He refused to implicate anyone in Communist activities.

Kazan has never discussed his HUAC testimony in detail, implying that he will render a full explanation in the future. Although Navasky tries to be fair-minded throughout, he grows impatient with Kazan: "His thesis—that in certain contexts to inform can be an act of honor, and that therefore it is simplistic to condemn all informers—sounds reasonable. But it begs the ques-



tion of whether his own 'token' betrayal occurred in such a context."

Others have not been so reticent. For those who still show the conflicts, tensions, and trauma that accompanied the informer decision over twenty-five years ago, Navasky brings a sense of sympathy, if not empathy. Consider Lee J. Cobb who became an informer in 1953 after turning down the committee's entreaties for two years. The period of his resistance meant no work for this exceptional actor, and it also meant his wife's institutionalization for alcoholism. After Cobb testified, he suffered a major heart attack. He later resumed work, but the memory of his cooperation wrenches him still: "I didn't act out of principle. I wallowed in unprincipledness. ... If I had not been in need, I'd have never cooperated. By implication I did dignify the Committee."

NAVASKY, determined to wring all the understanding he possibly can from the Hollywood experience, moves from the journalistic world of interviews and examination of committee testimony to the more abstract universe of social science research. He examines the recent literature on conformity and obedience, including analysis of concentration camp behavior and the classic social psychological studies of Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram. The studies generally detail the pressures to follow the dictates of those in power when the system (or experiment) is rigged to support the leader's prestige and authority. By analogy, Navasky argues that disobedience to the committee in the atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s must have been very difficult. As the author concludes, "The HUAC experiment worked because almost everybody played by the rules."

Paradoxically, in nearly all cases the committee already had the names of those former Communists whom the informers were pressured to reveal. In other words, the witnesses added no new information. Why then did the committee demand it? To degrade the informer, to enact a ritual of confession so odious as to assure the Committee that the informants had indeed mended their ways and had come over to the other side.

The degradation ceremonies functioned to confirm the validity of the state's political ideology: "The process of stigmatizing individuals as subversives, as agents of a foreign power, as conspirators, as having rejected the American heritage, reassured middle Americans of their own patriotism. Americans have always defined themselves largely by what they are against: America is for Americans; go back to where you came from; the foreign, the different, the strange, the subversive should

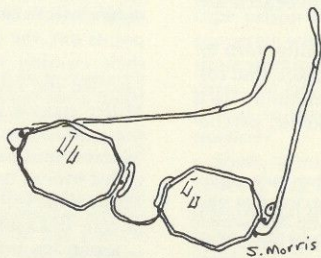
get out of town." As such, the ceremonies enabled the informers including many former Communists to see themselves as good, solid Americans. The ceremonies also served to fill an uncritical mass media's need for a steady diet of good theatre. In short, the "degradation ceremonies served the purposes of too many constituencies to be easily discarded."

Individually, the victims of the committee lost their jobs, their freedom, and often their health. On a community basis, the level of fear and distrust engendered by HUAC helped to destroy the formerly supportive Hollywood subculture. "Hollywood ... was a unique company town whose inhabitants invested their energies in and defined themselves by the community life. And when the sense of community died so did part of themselves."

A CURIOUS tension runs through *Naming Names*, one which never gets resolved. While Navasky focuses on the causes of obedience to authority, two-thirds of the witnesses did in fact rebel. They refused to cooperate with the committee. Navasky certainly recognizes this. He also points out that the social psychological studies he examines do not foreclose the possibility of rebellion. They show "that given models of courage, men* are inspired to resist. ..."

Navasky holds up the Lillian Hellmans, the Arthur Millers, and the Dalton Trumbos as moral examples of those who resisted. One suspects that he wants us to have such models available if (when?) the next witch hunt arrives. But models may not be enough. Despite the opposition of individuals, the HUACs and the McCarthys really did win. They controlled the domestic and foreign agenda of the United States until the 1960s. The whole repressive apparatus, along with "the vital center," ultimately functioned to censor our writing, purge our work force, halt advances in civil rights, and strengthen the foundation of a militaristic foreign policy. Moral exemplars may keep a tradition of protest going, but victory or even a more closely fought battle

needs more. It requires a rebuilding, nourishing, and strengthening of those very aspects of our culture and institutions that fell before HUAC. It needs a viable alternative press, nonestablishment lawyers, and avenues of survival that can't be squelched by a blacklist. That is a real if unspoken lesson from Navasky's fine book.



*Navasky unfortunately uses generic male nouns and pronouns throughout the book. Ironically, in this particular case, his very next sentence includes Lillian Hellman as one model of courage.

Maynard Seider is Assistant Professor of Sociology. His book *A Year in the Life of a Factory* will be published by Singlejack Books.

Images of Women and the Idea of Perfection

by Meera Clark

The following is the text of a talk given to the Northern Berkshire Women's Network on August 13, 1981.

I

MY TALK TODAY will consist of two parts. In the first part I will examine the images of women in four recent movies: two American—*A Change of Seasons* and *The Four Seasons*; two French movies—*The Last Metro* and *I Sent a Letter to My Love*. In the second and concluding section of my talk I will indulge in a freewheeling meditation on the philosophical implications of the images of women in contemporary society which, I believe, the movies both reflect and create.

At the very outset I want to make it clear that my aim is not a comprehensive "movie criticism" but merely an examination of the images of women and of the ideas implicit in these images. That is, I am interested in the sociological implications of what these movies say about women. Obviously, I am making a major assumption when I focus on the sociological content of these movies—that movies, particularly the so-called realistic ones, both reflect and create social reality.

Movies have taken the place that novels occupied in the eighteenth century: they are an immensely popular art form available to the rich and the poor and therefore instrumental in both creating and reflecting public tastes, attitudes, and trends. It is my contention that contemporary American movies, in general (there are always exceptions of course), portray younger women as physically perfect, mentally deficient, and emotionally vacuous and older women as idle, bitchy, and trying to hang on to their youth by their long red fingernails. Both younger and older women in our society as well as in our movies are tyrannized by an ideal of perfection, especially by that of physical perfection imposed quite arbitrarily by an increasingly mechanized media.

FOR THOSE of you who have not seen the movies I am going to talk about, I'd like to explain the plots briefly. *A Change of Seasons*, starring Shirley MacLaine, Bo Derek, and Anthony Hopkins, is about the wife of a college professor who discovers that her husband has been having an affair with a nubile college student, an affair he tries, rather fatuously, to justify by quoting all the great ones who worshipped youth and beauty—like Dante and Shakespeare. To lay claim to the weaknesses of great ones without being able to transfigure them into a *Divine Comedy*

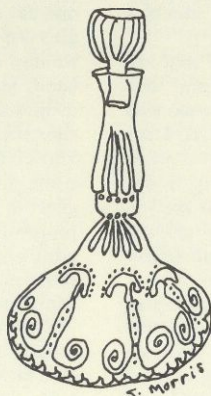
being able to transfigure them into a *Divine Comedy* or *Hamlet* is, I think, an exercise in futility. The wife, played by Shirley MacLaine, decides to have it off (it can't be described more gracefully than that) with the carpenter who happens to be working in the house. She giggles a lot, and she has a lot of fun. The carpenter is an attractive hulk, but it is not a romance or a lasting passion, but more a roll in the hay, a one-day stand, as it were, and is done in large part to get even with her husband. In other words, the older woman is portrayed as merely reacting to her husband. She has no strong identity or passion of her own, and above all, while her husband is shown in classroom situations, i.e. working at a profession, Shirley MacLaine is invariably discovered giggling, tipsy, sitting around being rather bitchy and, in general, playing the adjunct role to her husband's professional and social life. She is never seen coping with anything, not even cooking or rearing a child—those acceptable occupations of women—let alone being involved in a profession.

The young woman, played by Bo Derek, is every middle-aged man's fantasy come true—she has inflatable breasts, a stomach sucked in so rigorously that it looks unnaturally concave as if she possessed no equipment which would accommodate a fetus, seemingly endless legs, and a face so perfect that she looks like a Barbie doll come to life. Besides having all the physical attributes associated with popular and powerful ideas of what constitutes perfection, she is also an ever willing and seemingly indefatigable bed partner who hero-worships her man. What could be more aphrodisiac to a slightly paunchy, slightly balding, middle-aged professor who knows he has probably reached the beginning of the end both professionally and sexually? The movie, to do it some justice, does present the man as the ineffectual cad that he is, and he is finally rejected by both women; but my point is that neither of the women comes across as a worthwhile human being.

WHAT constitutes worth, in my eyes, is strength of character, a passion for, and response to, life. Strength of character can be manifested in many different ways but primarily, I think, through being able to cope with difficult situations which call for a certain amount of self-sacrifice and commitment. I

know that the concept of self-sacrifice sounds hopelessly old-fashioned and alien in the contemporary context when the self has replaced God, country, and community as the object of worship. Self-fulfillment is often touted as the most desirable goal in life. But as long as we live among people, as long as we are required to work, and as long as we are responsible and committed to people we love, whether family or friends, a certain amount of willing suspension of self is necessary. This willingness to set aside one's own needs temporarily (I do not recommend a permanent self-abnegation—it smacks of self-righteous martyrdom) in the cause of one's vocation is a mark of maturity or adulthood, for only children are unable to put someone else's needs first—they have to be taught to do so.

The willingness to put someone or something before self for a while is also a mark of passion without which life is not really a *lived* life but mere *existence*. What is passion? I would like to define it as a deeply feeling and imaginative response to and interest in something beyond oneself—be it literary, artistic, or domestic endeavor. A passionate interest in music or cooking is marked not by a desire to keep up with the Jones's, to show off and compete socially, but by an ability to be a *part* of one's endeavor, and by an ability to experience something *profoundly* and *totally*. Both the women, the wife of the professor and his adoring student, do not have this strength of character or passion for anything other than themselves. They emerge as highly decorative appendages to the man's life and very little else.



analytical detachment which makes him an admirably commonsensical companion, but also somewhat distant and patronizing.

The plot itself hinges on the disturbances caused in the relationship between three men and their wives who take their vacations together. The catalytic factor is the dumping of a wife of many years, played by Sandy Dennis, by her husband who predictably replaces her with a blonde stewardess young enough to be his daughter.

Now, all the men in the movie have successful professions and they talk about them, besides doing all the little practical things like cooking, sailing a boat, etc., that have to be done on vacation. The wives, Carol Burnett, Rita Moreno, and Sandy Dennis, however, are shown sitting around like comely lounge lizards whose forked tongues flicker out periodically with acerbic barbs at their husbands.

Since their children are grown up, they are not shown rearing children either. And only Sandy Dennis is shown having a hobby—photography—which she is in the danger of taking seriously, and for which she is laughed at by everybody. The other two don't seem to work at anything—jobs, children, or house—and Sandy, the only one who has an outside interest, is portrayed as a neurotic. Her pictures—we are shown close-ups of them—are endless shots of vegetables. Her interest in photography is reduced to an absurdity; thus the film disposes of the one woman with some interest outside of herself and her family.

More serious than this faux pas, is Alda's portrayal of the only young woman in the movie, the one who replaces Sandy Dennis. She is predictably blonde, blue-eyed, a sort of Cheryl Tiegs, Farrah Fawcett, Bo Derek all rolled into the exactly right proportions of breasts, teeth, hair, and unquestioning, starry-eyed adoration of her middle-aged lover whose emotional and physical flabbiness she obligingly fails to see. While the older women are consistently shown as idle and bitchy, this little girl is shown gurgling and cooing over her lover like a deranged turtledove.

Of course, all the middle-aged men predictably start vying for her attention to a chorus of intensified bitchiness by the older women. There is a superbly choreographed soccer game played quite improbably but successfully against a background of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, which shows the men practically killing themselves to demonstrate their vigor to the young girl. But more important and equally funny, while Carol Burnett, the most perceptive and honest of the wives, tells Alda exactly what she thinks of his adolescent behavior and flatly refuses to fuss over his

ADMITTEDLY, *A Change of Seasons* may be too slight a movie to be subjected to this kind of analysis, but Alan Alda's *Four Seasons* is a movie with semiserious intentions. Alda, the nice guy of movies, both in his appearance in the TV series *M*A*S*H* and in his support of the ERA, has shown himself as something more than the usual plastic Hollywood idol. He is apparently a man capable of some serious thought and strong convictions, and for that reason his movie deserves to be taken seriously. In other words, there seems to be more to him than his attractive, limber body and toothpaste ad smile.

The movie's subject, unusual for Hollywood, is the low-keyed one of friendship and Alda's main theme is that while friendship, like all other human relationships, has its seasons, its buoyant spring and its winter of discontent, the important thing is to maintain some sort of continuity of shared loyalty and commitment. A secondary theme seems to be a criticism of Alda's own favorite stance—one of cool,

WAITING FOR THE TROLLEY

by Miriam Leader

We stepped out of Molly's Bakery
Between a day-old chocolate whoopee pie
And a wrinkly Danish pastry
You began to sprinkle your salt and peppered bird's-nest beard
With bright yellow crumbs

And the mother bird brushed them off with her wing feathers
We sauntered along the avenue looking
For spring in the Last Elm Tree
Thinking that Spring Street in Williamstown
Is not a psychedelic deodorized heap
Where you lose your face, and the money
is pizazzed from your pocket by neon jazz

We wait on the corner for ten minutes and nothing
Happens at all. . .

*Hark! the trolley car is coming, Herb
Hear it go rattle-clang along the tracks
Like the open car to the Zoo in Cincinnati, remember?
Herb, get out there and wave it down
Or they'll never stop for us. . .*

The motorman jumped the tracks in 1938
We'll never see that trolley again.
Never mind, here comes the bus
Berkshire Regional Transit Authority, 18' long, 25¢ for old-timers

Bumping along on Route 2 to North Adams,
I'm scribbling this struggling poem
While the old street-car driver
Keeps one eye
On the bumper crop of blondes.

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bruised knee, our young friend, of course, ministers to her lover who, she says, "loves to be babied." Can you imagine anything more unaesthetic and less appetizing than a middle-aged baby?

THE CENTRAL POINT I want to make about both these movies is that beneath all the very enjoyable humour and zaniness, the characterization of the women is exceedingly clichéd. The women in both the movies fall into two categories easily recognizable from myth and folklore: the young, beguiling virgin, Sleeping Beauty waiting to be woken by a kiss from the prince, the princess in the tower rescued by the hero-knight; and the older devouring woman, Medusa who turns men into stone, or the wicked witch cackling with malice towards all. In other words, both movies play variations on that old chestnut—women as angels or vixens. The ideal of physical and spiritual perfection is pitted against the specter of ugliness. The reality, of course, is different. Women, like men, come in varying shapes and sizes, carrying a mixed

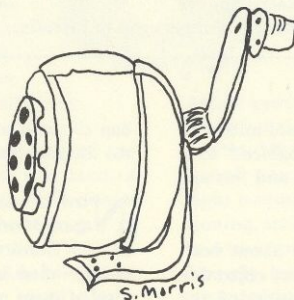
bag of good and evil—a mixture which is, I think, the distinguishing mark of all humanity.

NOW LET US turn to the two French movies—*The Last Metro* and *I Sent a Letter to My Love*. The central characters in both movies, surprisingly, are neither men nor young women, but older women. One of them, the heroine of *The Last Metro*, played by Catherine Deneuve, is incomparably beautiful and elegant, but the other, the central character in *I Sent a Letter to My Love* is old and fat, with a face that looks, as a *Time* magazine critic put it, like an old duffel bag. What is remarkable about both these French films is that not only are women the focus of the movies but their outward appearance is of only peripheral interest. The women, in contrast to the one-dimensional women presented in the American movies, emerge as complex, highly intriguing, passionate people who are valued not for how they look or because they embody an ideal of perfection, but for what they *do*, for the way they *cope with life*.

The Last Metro has a serious theme—the conditions of extreme hardship and terror under the Nazi occupation of Paris. The focus is not on political and economic conditions, however, but on the heroic struggles of an older woman who hides her Jewish husband in the cellar of the theatre in Montmartre of which he is a producer and director, and whose business she takes over. The woman is shown under three different kinds of extreme stress. First, she is continually harassed by the Gestapo, who periodically search the theatre. Second, her husband, brilliant, sensitive, under what virtually amounts to solitary confinement in the cellar undergoes a gradual personality change, becoming irritable and irrational. Third, the woman, while deeply attached to and protective of her husband, falls in love with the young actor she has hired to play the lead in the play, and who she believes is a playboy.

The woman, as Catherine Deneuve portrays her, is no superwoman. She is guilty of adulterous love, is accused by her coworkers of being too cold, too controlled, and indulges out of sheer frustration in a silly one-night stand. But all these are trivial and all too human flaws, compared to her poise, strength, and unflinching dedication to the safety of her husband and the theatre. She copes with every crisis, some comic, some tragic, with resource, charm, and strength. Her love for the young actor is no shallow self-indulgence either; it seems to be a genuinely passionate upsurge of all that is warm and alive within her.

NOW WE COME to the most surprising movie of all, a movie in which the central character is a woman who is over sixty, if a day, who is fat, with a face that indeed, in its pouches, shadows, and wrinkles, resembles an old duffel bag. The woman lives alone in a small house by the sea, caring for her younger brother, who, stricken by rickets since childhood, is confined to a wheelchair. The woman is tormented; at one point she even fantasizes about throwing her attractive but childishly selfish brother down a cliff. But her commitment to his welfare is absolute, and she is shown coping with the many crises that beset an invalid's life. Driven by her loneliness, she puts an ad in the personal column of the local newspaper asking for a companion, and when her brother replies, exposing his own loneliness and need, she decides to carry on a correspondence which calls upon all her ingenuity and strength. Beside the complexity of her feelings toward her brother and her passionate response to life, the pretty neighbor who visits with them regularly and who later marries the brother appears as a callow young fool.



What both the French movies have, and the American movies don't, is the image of a concept of beauty which is definable not by outward appearance but by inner worth. Both Catherine Deneuve and Simone Signoret come across as beautiful women not because they are "10" in looks, but because of the strength of their character and the depth of their passions. And—this is the important point—though they are by no means perfect, they are valued for their humanity and their passion.

II

IN THE SECOND PART of my talk I wish to ask some philosophical questions. Since philosophers from Plato onwards have been men with the leisure and freedom to speculate on finer issues, it is time I think that we women, mellowed as we are now by good food and wine, indulged in a little philosophical speculation. My questions are: what or who determines the ideal of perfection, especially physical perfection? Who says that a certain cast of features, a certain set of measurements, are the ideals we all should aspire to? And finally, is perfection a desirable goal to have?

The eminent critic, Susan Sontag, has pointed out that ideas of beauty in every culture are inextricably tied up with economic status. For example, the ancient Chinese considered long nails and small feet signs of beauty, because only aristocrats who did not have to work in the fields could afford to live with such nonfunctional appendages. In India a light complexion is valued because it proclaims the upper classes who do not have to labor in the sun. In the West a tan speaks of the leisure to bask in the sun, or the money to afford sun lamps. In medieval and Renaissance Europe plump women were considered beautiful—witness Rubens's well-endowed women—because only the poor were malnourished and thin. Today only the superrich can afford to look undernourished. It was the Duchess of

Windsor, perhaps the epitome of vacuity, who is supposed to have said that one can never be too rich or too thin.

Besides being tied to the law of filthy lucre, the ideal of perfection in beauty is, I submit, totally alien to nature. I remember once walking into the library at the University of Massachusetts and in the dim recesses finding a bowl of dark red roses which quite took my breath away. Then I had a vile suspicion. Were they so perfect, they could not be real? I walked up to them and touched them and, lo and behold, they were cold and plastic to the touch. If you notice, the gorgeous beauty of fall colors is the beauty of

imperfection—each leaf is scarred by frost and decay. The beauty of nature, whether in the seemingly careless symmetry of falling snow or the breaking of foam on the sand, is the beauty not of perfection, but of rhythm, a repetition with innumerable, often unpredictable, variations. It is the beauty of flaws contained in the symmetry of rhythm. One has only to observe the beauty of the meanest wildflower—the humble and entirely intriguing and aptly named devil's paintbrush, for instance—to realize that the fearful symmetry Blake sang about is fearful because it always hovers on the brink of a cosmic disorder and chaos. Perfection is entirely alien to the voracious life of nature; indeed total, immutable perfection bespeaks the inertness of death and artifice.

AND THAT brings me to the connection I want to make between artifice and perfection. I believe that our culture imposes on both men and women, but more on women, an ideal of physical perfection which is an offshoot of the terrifying growth of technology. One has only to look at women's magazines to confirm this. Not an issue of *Vogue*, *McCall's*, and the others, passes by without carrying what they call "before and after" or "make over" pictures. That is, they take pictures of women before makeup experts have got to them, before too full lips have been made thinner, before the eyebrows have been tweezed and tortured into the perfect arch, before the face has been shaded or lightened to the "correct" proportions. Who determines what the correct proportions are? Who determines that the arch of an eyebrow is too high or too low by the fraction of a millimeter, so that hundreds of women, bombarded by images of perfection in magazines and advertisements, tweeze and torture every hair on their eyebrows into the ideal shape? I believe that the ideal of perfection touted by thousands of magazines and advertisements has its origin in the ability of technology to create lifelike forms. It is the myth of Frankenstein reenacted in a blander and, therefore, much more insidious form.

The prime example of technologically produced "perfect" form that immediately comes to mind is the Barbie doll—that plastic creature with perfect hair, perfect features, and perfect proportions which simulates almost everything except the mutability of life. If we look at the after "make over" pictures in magazines, and look around at women in supermarkets, it becomes obvious that life imitates art, even such travesty of art as the ubiquitous Barbie doll, the consummate product of artifice, of technology. All the strenuous efforts of women's magazines are directed towards achieving a plastic perfection where the human face is ironed out of

all those features and flaws which make it individual and human and "made over" into images dreamed up by human computers. Indeed, many magazines go so far as to offer a package deal in which the reader fills out a form describing her features which is fed into a computer which in turn feeds the reader with details of how she should look. Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* is indeed prophetic. He depicts a group of suburban men quietly murdering their wives and replacing them with efficient, submissive, perfect robots. The lineal descendant of Frankenstein's monster, then, is the Barbie doll whose bland face conceals

a horror far greater than that of any easily identifiable monster—the faceless conformity produced by the computer age.



I PROPOSE that we women actively resist all notions of perfection imposed on us from without, that we fight the vast army of dress designers, makeup and hair experts who tell what is

right for us and at whose dictates women walk across an icy street in six inch heels courting assorted fractures. I am not, I want to make it clear, advocating a simple-minded back-to-nature movement whose logical end would be uncut nails and hair and unwashed faces. What I am proposing, instead, is the substitution of an ideal of excellence for the ideal of perfection.

The ideal of excellence would require us to fulfill our potential as human beings to the fullest extent as determined by standards *we set for ourselves*. While the ideal of perfection is usually imposed from without, and is an abstract ideal quite arbitrarily formed, excellence would come from within as the culmination of what each one of us is capable of. Excellence could become a form of aesthetics, an aesthetics in which there is no distinction between form and content, between the way we look and the way we behave. Excellence would be a matter of the kind of harmony which we continually see demonstrated in nature in which the sea encompasses its vast energy and myriad life forms in a deep harmonic rhythm or the spectacular fall of New England is a matter of deeply flawed splendor of colors. While the ideal of perfection is necessarily cold and dualistic and, therefore, restrictive, the ideal of excellence would take in the whole human being from the arch of an eyebrow to the performance of an action. The ideal of excellence is organic and vital and makes room for change—like life itself.

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Robert Bishoff on films

Through a Lens Distortedly: The Personal Nature of the Movies

MOVIES AFFECT US like memories or, more precisely still, like remembered dreams. They are impressions implanted on the mind to be recalled later, related to new, theretofore unrelated, experiences. Like memories or dreams remembered, movies—those we truly experience—are also organic. They grow and change, are reformed and reshaped each time they are replayed in the screening rooms of our minds. We relate to them because of who we are, and we become who we are, in part, because of how we relate to them. Returning to an old, remembered movie is like going back to a house remembered from childhood. It isn't the same; it's changed. But not really; celluloid and two-by-fours don't change, people do. Films revisited, recalled, examined, analyzed, are devices best used for measuring personal time and growth, experience and change, values and emotions.

It is a well-received sociological and aesthetic stance to see movies as having assumed that position in the culture once held by the novel. They are regarded as instruments used to "create and reflect public tastes, attitudes, and trends." Too often, however, the analogous relationship between movies and novels, based on similarity of position, leads to an assumption of similarity of form and effect. This assumption, in turn, induces a tendency to apply to the movies the same analytical processes as are used to interpret and respond to prose. Few will employ the principles of dream interpretation in interpreting prose, but most will not hesitate to use the procedures of prose interpretation to interpret movies. When a dreamer interprets he is engaging in a primarily creative activity; whereas, when a reader interprets a piece of prose he is involved in an essentially analytical process. My contention is simply that when we engage in the act of interpreting movies we must recognize it as more a creative act than an analytical process.

MOVIES are constructed of a series of still pictures projected on the screen at a rate of twenty-four frames per second. It is the viewer who creates the continuity, supplies the logic, and establishes the unity of these separate images. This act of creation forces the viewer to reach into himself, to his experiences, his associations, in order to form *his* finished film. The result must invariably be supersummative; the whole of a particular film experience is always greater than the sum of the parts provided within the film itself. Consequently, no two people ever see exactly the same film.

Therefore, when we "tell what a movie was about," we are relating our own creation of a fluid, continuous, unified structure superimposed on a remembered dream. When a perceptive feminist recounts the plot of

A Change of Seasons, for example, she might regard it as being "about the wife of a college professor who discovers that her husband has been having an affair with a nubile college student" in which the women "emerge as highly decorative appendages to the man's life and very little else." When, on the other hand, the same movie plot is recounted by a "slightly paunchy, slightly balding middle-aged professor," it might become a film about "the futility of middle-aged extramarital flings in which only the wife emerges as a person worthy of any admiration." Who is right? Which viewer actually *saw* the movie? Whose dream remembered are we to believe? Or what about a third, equally perceptive, viewer's rendering of the plot of *A Change of Seasons* as simply "pure garbage"? I would contend that all three accounts are precise renderings of the films they created. I would, however, also contend that all three are inaccurate in relating what they saw.

IF WE ARE to faithfully recount the content of a film, whether it is good, bad, or mediocre, we must speak of something other than plot. If film, in form and effect, resembles any type of literature, it is poetry, not the novel. Poetry, too, I would contend, is like memories or remembered dreams. A poem, to quote Archibald MacLeish, "should not mean, but be." A poem communicates not through plot but through images. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is not about what it is like to be old, or even what a nineteen-year-old T.S. Eliot thought it was like to be old. "Prufrock" is white flannel trousers and coffee spoons and mermaids singing. What *we* make of these images is ultimately what the poem means. Movies are images, and what *we* make of the images is ultimately what movies are about. Meaning in movies is not revealed through linear plot structure but through, for lack of a better phrase, concentric image reverberations. Images evoke associations which recall personal experiences which reverberate off other images, ultimately creating a unified, logical, fluid movie experience.

Like memories, or dreams remembered, the fun of recalling and recounting movies we have seen derives from the self-discoveries we make through participation in the creative process. The value gained from movie interpretation is primarily what we learn about our own values, emotions, experience, and change. The ultimate effect of movies, especially those we truly *see*, is that the images and their reverberations become a part of our accumulated experiences, thereby effecting in real ways who and what we are.

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The drawings in this issue are by Susan Morris of East Dover, Vermont.